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Can Private Institutions Learn from Mistakes?

Some Reflections based on the Portuguese Experience

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Zusammenfassung: In den zurückliegenden Dekaden hat sich in vielen Hochschulsystemen ein privater Sektor entwickelt. In vielen Fällen haben sich private Einrichtungen dabei von der Aussicht auf ein schnelles Wachstum leiten lassen. Häufig konnten sie unter der Voraussetzung agieren, dass ihre Angebote ohne Probleme von der Nachfrage absorbiert

wurden. Vor allem in Ländern, in denen die demographische Entwicklung trotz zunehmender Bildungsbeteiligungsquoten für einen Rückgang der Studierendenzahlen sorgt, sind diese Voraussetzungen nicht mehr gegeben. Angesichts dieser Situation sind die privaten Hochschulen gezwungen, sich neu zu positionieren.

Der vorliegende Aufsatz untersucht zwei mögliche Strategien der Profiländerung privater Hochschulen. Während die erste auf die Entwicklung von Programmen für die zweite und dritte Hochschulbildungsstufe abzielt, bemüht sich die zweite um die Stärkung des Forschungsbereichs. Die Daten legen jedoch nahe, dass die meisten Institutionen diese Strategien nicht verfolgen. Ihre Schwierigkeiten angesichts der neuen Situation weisen eine gewisse Pfadabhängigkeit mit ihren früheren Erfahrungen in der Expansionsphase auf. Die portugiesischen Privathochschulen tendieren dazu, am früheren Kurs der bloßen quantitativen Expansion und Nachfragedeckung festzuhalten. Dies wird sichtbar in ihren neuen Zugangsregelungen für ältere Studierende und in der Geschwindigkeit, in der diese Institutionen einander in neuen Wachstumsbereichen imitieren.

Entstanden in Zeiten schneller Expansion, scheinen private Hochschulen bedeutende Schwierigkeiten zu haben, alternative Strategien zu entwickeln, um ihr Profil zu ändern. Stattdessen versuchen die meisten dieser

Institutionen an den Entwicklungsmustern festzuhalten, die in Zeiten der schnellen Expansion der Hochschulbildung erfolgreich waren, aber vor dem Hintergrund einer rückläufigen Nachfrage unangemessen sind.

* * *

The last decades have witnessed the emergence of the private sector as a relevant reality in many higher education systems around the world (Kim et al. 2007). This is even the case of Europe, where the dominance of public provision has been more resilient. However, in many of those experiences most private institutions seem to be lured by the possibilities of rapid growth and often become associated with demand-absorption patterns. This creates an image that private institutions are basically fulfilling the demand that the public sector can not or does not want to enrol.

This may become a vulnerable position, especially in those countries, as in the case of most European countries, where demographic declines may outpace increases in the enrolment rate per age cohort. In those cases, private institutions are expected to face a tighter market in terms of student demand, thus forcing them to rethink their mission and profile – in general a painful and lengthy process – if they want to survive. These problems will be analysed through the Portuguese experience. In this paper we analyse the strategies followed by private institutions in this country to tackle the decreasing student demand, in order to assess to what extent these institutions are trying to change their academic profile or rather pursuing similar strategies under different guises.

1. Private Higher Education and Massification

In the last decades, all around the globe, higher education has been experiencing a notable growth of the private sector (Altbach 1999). This expansion of higher education has been fuelled by an intricate complex of societal and individual forces. At the policy level, governments have increasingly regarded the advanced qualification of human resources as a key factor in promoting national economic competitiveness. In times of growing globalization, the improvements in the qualification of human resources has become one of the few factors through which governments can actually contribute to enhance national economic performance. The expansion of higher education has been also significantly pushed by individuals, since an advanced degree remained a very attractive personal in-

vestment, as shown by persistently high private rates of return observable in many countries.

Another critical factor to understand the rise of private higher education is the fact that the recent expansion of higher education has coincided with a period of increasing constraints on public expenditure that also affected higher education. The difficulties in funding the continuous expansion of higher education have been a problem for both richer and poorer countries alike. In the case of the former, the so-called crisis of the welfare state has challenged the sustainability of the traditional financial reliance of higher education on public funding. In the case of the countries with lower levels of income, the financial limitations associated with a lower fiscal basis were regarded as a significant obstacle to the ambition of expanding the higher education system, if this would be essentially based on public funding. Thus, this expansion has taken place in times of increasing pressure towards greater parsimony in the use of public funds and to diversification of higher education's financial basis whereas possible.

A powerful argument in favour of increasing privatization was the pressure towards greater efficiency in the allocation of social resources and that public institutions should consider efficiency as a leading value in their activity like their private counterparts (Cave et al. 1990). The arguments used in favour of the development of private higher education were also related to the debates on the need to increase the external efficiency of the higher education system and with growing scepticism on the ability of governments to deliver good quality services in an efficient way.

The private sector was supposed to demonstrate an increased capacity for exploring new market opportunities and for occupying market niches, by using its higher administrative flexibility and financial motivation. Private and private-like institutions were expected to promote a better balanced supply of higher education from a geographical and disciplinary perspective. A similar rationale was present for the articulation with labour market demands, as the expected greater responsiveness of private-type HEIs was regarded as a powerful force driving institutions to supply qualifications more suitable to labour market needs.¹

Either due to a change in the ideological and political context or to pressing financial forces, privatization of higher education became a fast-

¹ More recent research in higher education has questioned this embedded belief. Levy (1999) suggested that under certain circumstances private higher education does not bring organizational diversity. In the specific case of countries where a late process of privatization played a role in the massification process, there are indications that private higher education has had an overall negative effect in the diversity of the system (Teixeira and Amaral 2002).

growing reality in many countries. Impressive increases of enrolments became common around the world, mainly as result of expansion of the private sector. For some systems this meant the emergence of a completely new reality, and in other cases this new wave of privatization engulfed the previous experiences (which consisted mainly of religiously-affiliated institutions), and changed the almost insignificant presence of private higher education into a sizeable part of the system.

One of the main characteristics of the recent expansion of private higher education has been very its close association with massification processes of higher education. In these situations, it was not uncommon that regulatory forces were weakened, in order to fulfil governments' purposes to rapidly expand access to higher education. The combination of strong social demand and lax regulatory forces has often led the private sector to a so-called demand-absorption pattern. Accordingly, private institutions have mushroomed and expanded rapidly in number of programmes and in size of enrolments, often largely outpacing the expansion of the public sector.

The positioning of the private sector as a demand-absorbing pattern poses several risks. This evolution has corresponded to a strategy that gave pre-eminence to quantity rather than quality in the development of many private institutions. The lax regulatory forces often stimulated opportunistic behaviour from many of these newly established institutions, by lowering requirements or simply by not enforcing regulatory rules that were in place. Moreover, governments may use the development of the private sector in order to insulate the public sector from an uncontrolled expansion. However, since in most cases the public sector continues to expand, once the growth of demand levels off the private providers will face a difficult market situation and the government no longer needs its contribution as it used to be the case.

The analysis of these risks is relevant for private higher education. In those countries that are still experiencing significant expansion of this sector, it may be useful to reflect about the experience of countries that allowed it to develop in an uncontrolled manner. On the other hand, it provides evidence about the capacity of institutions that emerged through massification processes and by focusing in quantitative expansion, to change their profile by placing greater emphasis in more qualitative aspects of development. We will explore these issues by analysing the Portuguese case.

2. Private Higher Education in Portugal – From Boom to Bust?

Western Europe has remained a bastion of public dominance in higher education. Despite the increasing willingness of Western governments to adopt market-like mechanisms (Teixeira et al. 2004), the existence of private institutions remained minimal in most of these systems. In fact, privatization of the systems occurred mostly by increasing the private-like aspects of the dominant public system, through stimulating competition in terms of students and funds, rather than by promoting or even allowing the emergence of a significant sub-sector of private higher education. This sub-sector was restricted, in most cases, to a small group of religiously affiliated institutions, frequently benefiting from some form of public financial support, primarily due to their prestige.

The only significant exception to this Western European pattern is Portugal, where a large private sub-sector developed during the last two decades. As in many Western European countries, private higher education had a small role in modern Portuguese higher education until the seventies. The development of private institutions was rather slow and until the early seventies there were only some few small colleges. In the early seventies the Portuguese Catholic University was established and in the turn to the eighties the size of the private sector remained rather small. Nonetheless, the pace of implementation changed significantly from the mid-1980s onwards and until the mid-nineties the private sector became the fast-growing sub-sector in a rapidly expanding Portuguese higher education system. This fast expansion period was particularly promoted by a governmental decision to lower the requirements for students to enter higher education (Teixeira/Amaral 2000).

During the last decades the Portuguese higher education system has undergone a massive expansion and the private sector played a significant role in that process (see Table 1). Most private institutions attained their highest enrolment by the mid-nineties, but then suffered a rapid decline, in some cases above 50% of their maximum enrolment. The decline of enrolments in Portuguese private higher education seems to be associated with the changing context of higher education, namely in demographic patterns. After several years of persistent expansion, the decline in fertility that took place from the 1980s onwards has finally surfaced in higher education demand.

Table 1: Evolution of enrolments in Portuguese Higher Education

	1971		1981		1991		1996		2007	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Public uni-versities	43,191	87.3	64,659	76.8	103,999	55.7	147,340	44.1	175,998	46.2
Public polytech-nics	2,981	6.0	12,195	14.5	31,351	16.8	65,377	19.6	108,335	28.7
Privates	3,289	6.7	7,319	8.7	51,430	27.5	121,399	36.3	92,548	24.6
Total	49,461	100.0	84,173	100.0	186,780	100.0	334,868	100.0	376,917	100.0
Gross enrolment rate % (20–24 years)	7.9%		11.0%		24.4%		44.3%		47.7% (census 2001)	

Source: Barreto 1996; Simão, Santos and Costa 2002; OCES 2007

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Moreover, by the mid-nineties, the government decided to change its policy from uncontrolled expansion to increased quality, since the participation rates had become close to the EU averages. New legislation re-introduced national examinations at the end of secondary education and allowed institutions to set minimum marks in the access examinations to higher education. While the best institutions did so, this was carefully avoided by less reputable institutions which tried to fill as many vacancies as possible by using lower entrance standards. Thus, by the mid-nineties private institutions had not only to face an adverse changing context of the demand for higher education, but also a more demanding attitude from the side of policy-makers.

Nonetheless, the current difficulties experienced by most private institutions can not all be explained by this adverse demand context, but are also explained by its own profile. During the heyday of expansion there was strong propensity to focus on cheap and popular degrees that posi-

oned private higher education as demand-absorbing, as it is frequently the case with this sector. The strong geographical and disciplinary concentration of the private sector, of which there are many international examples (Teixeira/Amaral 2002), led to saturation in certain areas and made it more difficult to find alternative ways to attract students. The situation was made worse because, despite the increase in cost-sharing (Teixeira et al. 2006), public institutions remained a cheaper and more prestigious alternative.

The response of many private institutions to the current difficulties was initially of denial about the relevance of the changes in student demand. Eventually, the scale of the problem forced the private sector to consider changes in its profile.

When the data on study programmes are analysed, some interesting patterns emerge. Table 2 presents the decline in the number of new students entering private university education. The total decrease is equal to 25.4%, which is unevenly distributed. The area of Social sciences, Commerce and Law presents a 35.3% decrease, whereas all the other areas show only a 10.6% decrease. Therefore the present situation of many private universities is the result of their initial strategy of concentrating the offer of programmes in a low-cost area with declining employment prospects. For instance, first year total enrolments in Law have declined from 1705 in 1997/98 to only 674 in 2004/05, which corresponds to a 60.5% decline.

Table 2: First year enrolments in the private university sector

	1997/8	1998/9	1999/0	200/1	2001/2	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5
Total private university	16.823	17.141	16.575	16.942	16.333	16.137	14.528	12.545
Social sci., commerce, law	10.107	9.501	8.729	9.099	8.477	8.682	7.721	6.538
Others	6.716	7.640	7.846	7.843	7.856	7.455	6.807	6.007

Source: OCES, 2005

The private polytechnic sector has remained far more stable than the private university sector. The number of first year students has changed from a total of 8,875 in 1997/98 to a maximum of 10,669 in 2001/02, to decrease to 8,453 in 2004/05, which represents a decline of only 4.8% relative to 1997/98. Table 3 explains this behaviour. One observes a decline of enrolments in the two major traditional areas, Education (from 36.9% to 24.4%) and Social Sciences, Commerce and Law (from 31.6% to 14.0%), while the area of Health and Social Protection shows a large increase from 13.7% to 52.1%.

Table 3 : Evolution of first year enrolments in the private polytechnic sector (%)

	1997/8	1998/9	1999/0	2000/1	2001/2	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5
Education	36.9	38.3	53.3	48.5	44.4	39.3	33.0	24.4
Arts and Humanities	7.7	6.0	4.1	4.7	3.5	3.8	3.5	4.3
Social Sc., Commerce, Law	31.6	27.3	17.7	14.0	13.2	12.5	12.9	14.0
Sciences, Maths, Informatics	3.8	3.7	2.9	2.9	2.4	2.3	1.9	1.9
Engineering, Manufacturing and Building Industries	3.2	4.1	2.2	2.5	2.3	1.7	1.9	1.8
Agriculture	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Health and Social Protection	13.7	17.6	18.0	25.7	32.6	38.1	44.4	52.1
Services	3.2	2.9	1.7	1.7	1.6	2.3	2.4	1.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: OCES, 2005

The increase of enrolments in the area of Health and Social Protection was due to the transfer of the Nursing Schools and Health Technician Schools from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Education. This process seems to have been followed by less stricter regulation of training in these areas, thus creating a new area with strong capacity to attract students. The behaviour of the institutions has strong isomorphic characteristics. When an institution starts a new programme that attracts students there is a phenomenon similar to what happened in the brave new world when someone struck gold: lots of institutions jump into this new opportunity for a short term escape from bankruptcy and propose new programmes irrespective of the absence of consolidated academic staff, facilities or libraries. There has been the “management” race, the “environment” race, and more recently the “health” race.

Therefore, while the private university sector has not been able to find alternative demand niches the polytechnic sector was able to move into the areas associated with health. However this is apparently a short-term strategy as the niche has clearly become overpopulated and with the steady

increase of the offer from public polytechnics it will soon emerge as another crisis area for the private sector.

One of the possibilities explored was a restructuring of the private higher education landscape through a process of mergers and acquisitions. However, previous analysis of the very few cases available suggested that the merger strategy has been far more complex than the acquisition one (Teixeira/Amaral 2007). Moreover, the most significant effect, of the acquisitions that took place in recent years within the private sector, was to increase the degree of concentration, and the emergence of some large players, in a traditionally atomistic sector (there are more than one hundred private institutions, which is quite high for the size of Portugal). The effects in the reduction of the number of unfilled available places were less apparent.

Another recommended strategy was diversification, namely by exploring programs other than the first cycle. However, until recently private higher education has shown limited capacity to diversify in terms of the type of programs provided (see table 4), remaining almost completely focused in the somehow stagnant market of first cycle and a very small presence in second and third cycles. Although this also happens to a certain extent in the public sector, the situation is clearly more significant in the private one.

Table 4: Distribution of Graduates by Cycle of Studies

Sub-Sector	Public			Private		
Year	1996/97	2001/02	2005/06	1996/97	2001/02	2005/06
1 st Cycle	21,576	25,504	32,672	13,847	15,717	16,210
2 nd Cycle	1,655	2,207	4,248	229	331	571
3 rd Cycle	231	585	1,094	1	9	30
TOTAL	23,462	28,296	38,014	14,077	16,057	16,811

Source: Ministry of Science and Higher Education

This pattern of concentration in the initial levels of training is difficult to be changed. Most private institutions have an academic staff with lower average qualifications than their public counterparts. This has become even more visible since qualified staff is more expensive and normally teaches fewer hours, which in the current times of financial stringency has made even more problematic hiring qualified permanent staff. Thus, most private institutions have very limited capacity, as regards human resources, to develop second and third cycle programs, which are far more demanding in terms of academic and legal requirements than first cycles ones.

The limitations on the composition of the academic staff have meaningful implications to another important issue, i.e., the balance between teaching and research activities. Most institutions have a very limited capacity to develop research activities, because of their significant share of non-permanent staff in order to minimize costs. Moreover, many private institutions often prefer to recruit faculty with lower academic credentials but significant practical expertise, because they believe that enhances their attractiveness to students and employers.

Table 5: Number of R&D Units Accredited by the National Science Foundation

	Total	Public			Private			
		Univ.	Polytech.	Total	Catholic Univ	Other Uni	Polytech.	Total
R&D units	963	803	61	864	40	26	33	99

Source: Ministry of Science and Higher Education

The data presented in Table 5 are clear about the implications of the current situation for the private institutions' research capacity. According to that table, the number of private research units accredited by the Portuguese National Science Foundation is minimal when compared to the public sector. The situation is even more striking when we exclude those centres affiliated with the Portuguese Catholic University, which stands out as a different type of institution.² The current situation is largely explained by a pattern of development of the private sector based on quantitative expansion which led to a very poor commitment to research activities, namely since these activities, despite their often high social value, have a very limited short-term return. Moreover, the fact that the number of accredited units is very small poses significant limitations to future developments, since only accredited centres and researchers associated with them are eligible for public research funds. The fact that private institutions are significantly concentrated in social sciences and humanities, whose research output is far less visible (especially regarding bibliometric indicators), also limits their potential to attract significant external resources to develop further those activities. Thus, the situation regarding research activity is not likely to change significantly in the coming years.

The data presented provide some indications that private institutions have until the moment introduced very small changes in their profile focused in (undergraduate) teaching. A striking example of this unwilling-

² The Catholic University was established much earlier than the others and has historically enjoyed a better reputation than the other private universities.

ness to change their profile concerns the access of mature students. In 2006 the government has changed the access conditions for mature students (at the time over 25). A new regime was introduced, lowering the age limit to over 23 years, while giving institutions ample freedom to define the access conditions. This was presented as an instrument to stimulate institutions to enrol those students, regarded as a strategic objective in terms of national policy because of the poor average qualification of the Portuguese labour force. However, institutions have seen this as an opportunity to compensate for the lack of traditional students by defining very low requirements.

Table 6: Mature Students entering Higher Education through the New Access System

Year	2006/7			2007/8		
Sub-Sector	Filled* Places	Successful** Candidates (%)	Enrolled (%)***	Filled Places	Successful Candidates (%)	Enrolled (%)
Pub. Univ.	1,271	74.4	4.3	2,083	79.9	6.4
Pub. Polyt.	2,986	78.6	13.9	3,956	77.0	14.9
Priv. Univ.	4,820	88.4	32.1	3,723	90.8	23.3
Priv. Polyt.	1,779	91.3	24.6	2,011	92.9	25.7
TOTAL	10,856	83.7	14.8	11,773	82.7	14.2

* Enrolled 1st year students (over 23 years of age).

** Pass rate of over 23 years old candidates in entrance examinations.

*** % of over 23 years old first year students relative to all new first year students.

The data from the last two academic years seems to confirm both risks. Private institutions have seized this new group as a major source of new students and in two years they have become circa one fourth on the new students cohort. Moreover, the rate of success of applicants in the access examinations is clearly higher in the private sector. Since other data continue to suggest that students regard private institutions as a second option, the possibility that private institutions were attracting better candidates than the public ones can clearly be discarded. Private institutions are again showing their eagerness to develop through expanding enrolments, rather than by repositioning themselves as a quality alternative to mass public higher education.

3. How fast are Private Institutions learning with their experience?

During the last decades we have seen a major expansion of higher education, including many regions of the world in which access to higher education was previously extremely restricted. This persistent expansion has led to the emergence of mass higher education as a global phenomenon. However, pressed by increasing financial constraints and by an increasing cost-burden due to massive expansion of the higher education sector, governments have regarded the promotion of private higher education as a viable policy alternative to the often over-stretched public sector. The expansion of the private sector was therefore often associated with massification and led in many cases to the development of the so-called demand absorption behaviour, being the sector mostly dominated by institutions essentially focused in teaching activities with a minor or non-existent research mission.

However, in some countries rapid growth has given way to more stagnant demand, which has forced institutions to rethink their profile in order to obtain a renewed academic and political legitimacy. This is the case of Portugal where a large private sector, developed in the heyday of massification and expansion, has been exploring possible mechanisms to deal with declining demand in first-cycle education.

In this paper we have considered two possible strategies for private institutions to change their profile. One was the development of second and third cycle programs. The other was to strengthen their research mission. In both cases the data available at the moment suggest that most institutions are either ignoring those options or having difficulties in exploring them. These difficulties are somehow path-dependent to their previous experience of expansion based on quantity and teaching emphasis.

Recent developments also indicate that Portuguese private institutions seem prone to return to past tendencies of quantity expansion and demand-absorption. This is illustrated by their behaviour regarding the new access mechanism for mature students or the way they rapidly mimic each other in new expanding fields. Shaped in times of fast expansion, private institutions seem to show significant difficulties in learning to develop alternative strategies that may change their profile. Instead, most institutions tend to persist in a pattern of development that may have been successful in times of rapid expansion of higher education, but that seems inadequate in helping them to face a more adverse context of declining demand.

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